

The Continuum Of Uncertainty

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*"Being confronted with the impossible makes us ask unexpected questions."
Emilie Conrad*

We all live along a spectrum of uncertainty, but usually only realize this in retrospect. We have plans and ideas about what our life is about and where we think we are headed. And it can all change in a moment: a drunk driver can head right at us with nowhere to escape his impact, soldiers can go on a rampage in our village without warning, a flash flood can wash away our home, but for Emilie Conrad and me, it was metastatic cancer that suddenly announced the change of trajectory of our lives and brought an acute awareness of the uncertainty that had always been there. Emilie and I both faced a sudden, unexpected diagnosis of advanced stage cancer that had already spread far beyond its site of origin at initial diagnosis. What follows are some of the things we pondered together during the last year of her life (2014).

I did not think I'd live long enough to ask some of the questions I'm asking these days. It's been many years since I was diagnosed with an advanced stage of cancer (2009) and told that I would most likely die within a year or two. I'm living outside the realm of probability and therefore, inside the realm of possibility, and within this mysterious domain I am challenged with a deluge of unexpected questions. I am living proof of the unfolding of Emilie's statement about being confronted with the impossible.

Curiosity

What are some of these "unexpected questions"? Asking this question, in and of itself, aside from any other potential questions or answers, is an expression of curiosity. When confronted with what seems impossible, unworkable, and undoable we have a choice. We can "play dead," shut down and go into denial; we can act out and lash out in violent reactive protest; or we can find a way to meet the unfolding moment and become curious. This is easier said than done, especially when faced with impending decrepitude and death, and during these challenging times, Continuum practice formally provides a container for us to enter the unknown and explore the possibilities that present themselves when we engage breath, movement, sensation, sound, and the awareness that dwells at the still center of our turning worlds. Curiosity about our

embodied process can flourish even as the body disintegrates and dies.

Continuum is an open-ended inquiry that has the potential to improve the quality of people's lives, not because it cures illness, creates bliss or enlightenment, but because it allows people to be attentive to and informed by the necessity of the moment. In this domain of open awareness, as we are informed by what's going on in our bodies, we are offered the possibilities of either making conscious choices or trusting in the unfolding of an unconscious process. It's this trust in the wisdom of the body's intelligence, outside of our conscious control that allows us to be carried to our end without flailing.

Open-ended Exploration Leads To Unexpected Wonder

Continuum is an inquiry, not a method of solving problems or treating diseases. The potential benefits of Continuum get distorted when people practice it in order to accomplish something specific. Although many people are called to Continuum practice because of illness, injury, trauma, bodily dysfunction, or dissatisfaction in life, the expectation that practice will cure or change something specific is a limiting belief. Being diagnosed with a cancer that has already spread can feel a bit like being out at sea on a leaky boat. Continuum practice encourages us to identify with the ocean rather than the boat and appreciate our resonance with and connection to the universal or cosmic fluid body as our small body declines. When we learn to trust the fluid intelligence of the body, of life itself, it can lead us all to unexpected wonder.

A woman attended a class series I taught once that explored the eyes. She had had an unsuccessful laser eye surgery and was left with pain and severely compromised vision in one eye. She desperately wanted to improve her ability to see. The class ended and she experienced no change in her eyes. She was profoundly disappointed, but she had been enchanted with the mysterious aspects of Continuum practice and decided to enroll in my next class, which explored the heart. She was willing and able to attend to her heart non-judgmentally because she had no fear that there was something wrong with it. Unexpectedly, while in a 2-hour Continuum dive exploring the swirling movement of blood through her heart, she felt a stabbing pain and a sensation she described as “unfurling” behind her eye. It was momentarily painful, but

she didn't panic because she could suddenly see clearly from her affected eye. She sat in open attention with both eyes open for the rest of the dive feeling curiosity and gratitude for the unexpected benefit. She had the insight that staring at her problem with fear, despair, anger, and judgment did not nurture her awareness. She was finally able to experience the inherent wisdom of her body when she let go of fighting with her apparently damaged eye. Her body found its own way to heal and creatively compensate for her altered eye, as she allowed exploration without an agenda.

Acceptance Informs Being Vs. Doing

Desperation fosters an emotional state that prevents listening. Despair might temporarily cease when the person feeling it gets what they think they want, but more often than not, it turns out to not be what they need, and despair returns with a vengeance. Despair can also be dissolved by choosing to let go or let things be as they are. Desperate negative thinking limits the field of exploration. Desperate positive thinking can turn into denial, and cloud the field with grasping for an expectation that is impossible to achieve. Hope might open the realm of possibilities, but expectation severely limits potential outcomes. Only acceptance of what actually is, can tap into the source of wisdom that is necessary to guide us to an alternative pathway of being.

As Emilie was making decisions about medical and alternative treatment options, we explored the question of **being** versus **doing**. What is the right balance? When do we take action and intervene? When do we be patient and wait to see what happens without willfully choosing a particular course? **Being** doesn't get me to my airport departure gate on time. I need to **do** something to catch my plane. If I fracture my arm, I don't want to sit in open attention; I want an orthopedic surgeon to do something about it, to "fix" it. There's nothing wrong with goal-oriented action. It is sometimes necessary.

How might our final days be different if we arrive at a state of acceptance of the inevitability of death, be with the recognition of the inexorable, and become curious about it? Continuum practice helps us cultivate insight to discern when to choose being versus doing and to have a chance to live without flailing up until the moment our life ends.

Explore The Territory; Don't Just Follow The Map

Although Continuum can be used to explore certain areas, systems, or conditions of the body, I don't believe in Continuum "treatment protocols." Protocols and treatment plans are tools of western mainstream medicine, as well as some other structured systems of alternative or complementary health care. Mainstream medicine looks for answers. The search is automatically narrowed when you think you know the question. Emilie occasionally chose to use the word "protocol" because she felt it helped people get into the neighborhood of the domain they wished to explore. She equated a protocol with a map and hoped that people would appreciate that exploring the territory was more important than taking the map literally and following the protocol.

Connection To Something Other Than Ourselves

As we develop nuanced embodied perception, we begin to know the difference between what we feel inside our bodies as opposed to what arises from outside our bodies. We become able to distinguish mental activity from physical states and can articulate and communicate this sensory vocabulary to ourselves and to others. Our sense of connection to something other than ourselves offers solace during times when what we call our "self" is struggling with the agony of disintegration. Whether this connectedness is to something we consider "greater," such as the natural world, the cosmos, or the Divine, or is more mundane, such as our connection to loved ones, animals, or community, we can choose to seek refuge from our suffering through connection to something other than our small sense of self.

Consciousness & Dying

Emilie and I pondered the lack of control that is inevitable at the end of life. So many people struggle with feeling undignified when control is lost, and yet, this inability to control the body as we die is a ubiquitous human experience. This is one of the many impossible situations she spoke of in her last few months. "Being confronted with the impossible makes us ask unexpected questions" was her response to what felt like the most difficult challenge of her life – how to remain conscious during the excruciating process of dying and not impatiently plead for it all to end. Before she lost conscious self-awareness, Emilie acknowledged the difficulty of having been devoted throughout her life to consciousness exploration and being forced to yield to the effects of cancer

spreading through her brain, altering her ability to engage her own consciousness.

We need to tread lightly and not stare at our diseases and dysfunctions. Death will not allow us to fix our gaze upon its unfolding. There is an organic sort of shyness that can trigger us into protective hiding when stared at. I don't mean social or emotional shyness, the feeling of self-consciousness when looked at. This shyness is not personal; it is more like the expression of shyness that we find in the natural world - the way a bird is scared off by staring at it, or the way animals in the wild run and hide if they know they've been spotted. The danger is that our overly focused attention could trigger a compensatory response in which the body goes into "decoy mode" hiding the real area in need and showing us another irrelevant symptom on which it feels safe to focus. This is a great example of the wisdom of our survival instinct in action. Continuum has the ability to "fly under the radar," as Emilie loved to describe it, and sneak in the back door to bypass the filter of our hypervigilant over-protective survival mechanism. Continuum allows us to care for ourselves gently, and gradually and titrate our tolerance for vulnerability.

Cultivating Care

We all need to cultivate caring for ourselves simply because we yearn to be cared for, and not because it alleviates the fear of disease, or the disease itself. If you eat a certain way because you're afraid of developing cancer or heart disease - your efforts are fear-based and they will eventually backfire. If you have a mammogram because you are afraid of breast cancer, don't think you can exterminate that fear, or avoid the disease by checking it off your list. If you do your daily Continuum practice because you are afraid of a disease and you think you are somehow cleansing yourself by doing it, it won't work. The fear is stronger, more paralyzing, especially if you are not conscious of your motivation. As long as you practice from a place of trying to change things, or not accepting things exactly as they are in your body, you will fool yourself and not respond from the deepest, clearest place of inquiring and discovering what you need.

Being confronted with the impossible offers us a rarified opportunity to live into the endless stream of questions that emerge as we approach the horizon of our

consciousness and realize that it constantly moves ahead of us. Continuum offers a powerful way for each individual to explore open-endedly and to search for questions, not answers. The answer to these questions lives differently in each one of us, and presence with curiosity spurs us on to endlessly explore the constantly unfolding unexpected questions of our lives.